

U.S. Test Stamps related to the BEP (ca. 1907-1959)

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing's involvement with stamp production in 1894 brought innovation. Security devices (such as watermarked paper) and new formats (booklets and coils) were introduced within a decade. By the early 1900s the BEP was looking at rotary press printing to speed stamp production. In the 1930s, the BEP installed electric-eye perforators to improve stamp centering, and by the 1950s the BEP was experimenting with pregummed paper and what is known as "dry" intaglio printing on paper with a lower moisture content.

Each innovation required many tests. Rather than using postage stamps, which are accountable paper, the BEP began creating and using "dummy" or "test" stamps. The earliest were perforated blanks on watermarked paper, but soon other designs that more closely simulated stamps were created and used.

Over time, test stamps were used for experiments in:

- Printing and overprinting
- Paper types
- Gumming
- Processing
- Stamp separation

Their production and use (by the USPOD and others) was later expanded to include:

- Vending equipment tests
- Affixing equipment tests
- Live mail tests
- Equipment demonstrations

The scope of this single-frame traditional exhibit is from the first BEP test items (ca. 1907) to the ubiquitous "For Testing Purposes Only" labels. Included are:

- Blank types
- Pre-Hamilton
- Hamilton
- Minerva Head
- Shaded Rectangles
- Kansas Territorial Experiment

Sheet, booklet and coil formats are all represented.

Items marked () have been expertized and have accompanying certificate.*



Top large-margin block of 4 of the first-known BEP test stamp (ca. 1907). These blanks are on double-line watermarked USPS paper, perforated 12 and are the size of normal definitive stamps. Block also features the newly discovered forward-stepping watermark pattern, which is the only type known on these test stamps. ()*

1909 "1,2,3,4"-type Hamilton-head forerunner



Engraved experimental rotary press pair ("Experimental Stamp 1234"), on soft, ungummed wove paper. Upper-left pair from BEP Director J.E. Ralph-signed block of 12 – "first impression pulled from an experimental press designed by J.E. Ralph and B.F. Stickney from intaglio roll."

The first BEP test stamps with designs resulted from the need to produce more stamps faster – and in a continuous format. Mimicked stamp designs accurately simulated how printed stamps would perform on new equipment.

By 1906 companies began receiving imperforate stamps from the BEP, which they coiled and used in affixing machines. The BEP began producing coils in 1908, but faced obstacles. Sheets of flat-plate stamps had to be pasted together to slit into coil rolls. The coil format was immediately popular and demand increased. BEP's mechanical expert, Benjamin Stickney, designed an experimental rotary press in 1909. "Experimental Stamp with #s 1234" was ordered Feb. 15, 1909 (die 7224), hardened June 28, 1909, and used to create transfer rolls 12756 and 12761. The design (with no vignette) mimicked the Washington-Franklin series.